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# Seeing What Needs to be Seen, Saying What Needs to be Said: Discourse Analysis for Critical Adult Education

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Keywords: discourse analysis, critical adult education, theory and method

**Abstract:** We explore several prominent traditions of discourse analysis and their potential for critical scholarship in adult education. Conclusions include key insights for adult educators to engage with the theory and practice of conducting discourse analysis.

## Problem and Purpose

There has been continuing discussion in the field of adult education about what some colleagues refer to as critical adult education (e.g., Brookfield, 2004; Cervero & Wilson, 2001; Edwards & Usher, 2000; Foley, 1999; Hart, 1990). Much of the adult education literature that is variously defined as “critical” underscores the role of educational practices in producing, sustaining, and transforming relations of power and the interests they represent from social, cultural, and historical perspectives. Although several areas of study exist, critical approaches to adult education generally aim to link critique with social action for purposes of social and educational justice (St. Clair & Sandlin, 2004). Critical adult educators draw upon such intellectual traditions as Critical Race Theory, critical theory, cultural studies, feminism, literary criticism, Marxism, neo-Marxism, poststructuralism, postcolonialism, and queer theory to inform research agendas and instructional practices. We claim that while some adult educators have embraced this rich theoretical landscape to explore issues of power, knowledge, subjectivity, and representation in educational settings, the investigatory “methods” employed are often poorly explained or too often loosely amalgamated as “qualitative” or “content” analysis. This weak articulation of theory *and* method limits the use and effectiveness of critical adult education scholarship. We propose, therefore, that inquiry into “critical” topics could benefit from a serious engagement with the theoretical/methodological insights of discourse analysis as one way to provide solid conceptual and methodological footing for the types of critical work we aim to do. In order to understand this claim, we must first recognize that discourse analysis means different things to different people. In this paper, we examine a limited range of those differences and their potential for critical scholarship in adult education. We conclude with key insights for adult educators to engage with the theory and practice of conducting discourse analysis.

## Review of the Literature: The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly

Discourse is clearly a messy concept. The meaning and usage of discourse has undergone several shifts in social science, reconfiguring how discourse analysis is applied in educational research (MacLure, 2003). For Lee and Poynton (2000) these transitions signify a “linguistic turn” in social theory that has influenced disciplines for over thirty years. Mills (2004) describes a range of philosophical and theoretical meanings of the term; “discourse” is historically informed by cultural theory, linguistics, and social psychology and can mean such things as, but not limited to: the utterance of language (*parole*), a whole system of language (*langue*), a way of signifying areas of experience from a particular perspective (e.g., academic discourse), and a type of practice that constitutes meaning (e.g., identity) and regulates conduct in society. With such a range of meanings, it is challenging to decipher what constitutes the

boundaries of discourse. Gee (1999, pp. 6-7) provides a helpful distinction between the textual (micro) and social (macro) features of discourse by designating “discourse” with a “little d” and “Discourse” with a “big D”: “When ‘little d’ discourse (language-in-use) is melded integrally with non-language ‘stuff’ to enact specific identities and activities, then, I say that ‘big D’ Discourses are involved...” For Gee, the micro-analytical descriptions of what people “say and do” are embedded within larger, social “Discourses,” such as educational discourse. These textually- and socially-oriented characterizations are very important for conducting discourse analysis and are subject to much debate in the literature of discourse analysis theory and method.

Applied linguists, poststructuralists, and critical discourse analysts have operationalized the larger project of discourse analysis in the field of education (MacLure, 2003). While each uniquely handles the “micro” and “macro” approaches of discourse analysis, they are all concerned on some level with analyzing the relations between discourse and power to reveal the (re)production of social practices and structures. According to Luke (1995, p. 12), a critical analysis of discourse can help educators “see” how power relations are produced and circulated in our everyday words and images: discourse analysis “attempts to establish how textual constructions of knowledge have varying and unequal material effects and how whose constructions come to ‘count’ in institutional contexts is a manifestation of larger political investments and interests.” Adult education scholars have shown interest in various forms of discourse critique that share this vision of political practice. Many of these analyses concentrate on the construction and effects of spoken or written d/Discourse in community education (e.g., Rule, 2005), lifelong learning (e.g., Usher & Richards, 2007), literacy education (e.g., Rogers, 2003; Wickens & Sandlin, 2007), online communities (e.g., Kelland, 2006), planning theory (e.g., Wilson & Cervero, 1997), the media (e.g., Wright, 2007), and higher education (e.g., Nicoll & Harrison, 2003). Despite differences in conceptual orientation, many of these analyses seek to critically examine the production, interpretation, and/or use of educational “texts” in order to disrupt or “denaturalize” (Luke, 1995) underlying “structures of meaning” for purposes of social equity. While indeed promising for revealing and challenging the (re)production of inequality, the variousness and lack of theoretical/methodological articulation of such investigations limits their usefulness. Our point is that if adult educators aim to use discourse analysis as an effective form of political practice, we need to more closely account for specific theories of discourse analysis and precise descriptions of method.

Although evident, the potential of discourse analysis remains largely under-developed in adult education scholarly practice, which suggests we could learn from several prominent discourse traditions available to us. MacLure (2003, p. 174) makes a distinction between two traditions: “one stems from European philosophical and cultural thought” that is associated with poststructuralism while the other has roots in “Anglo-American linguistics.” Luke (1995) recognizes critical discourse analysis (CDA) as another tradition of discourse analysis which integrates elements of linguistic analysis with (post)structural discourse theory to critically examine discursive practices (e.g., classroom teaching in higher education) that constitute the (re)production of ideological-discursive structures of power. For the purpose of this paper, we limit our discussion by briefly recognizing key features of linguistic discourse analysis, poststructuralist discourse theory (particularly Foucault’s approach), and CDA to stimulate further discussion and debate about the theory and practice of discourse analysis for critical adult education.

### *Linguistic Discourse Analysis*

Linguistic discourse analysis is broadly defined by its emphasis on the detailed textual analysis of written and spoken language, particularly at the clause and sentence level of texts and talk. According to MacLure (2003, p. 174), many kinds of discourse theories and methods exist within linguistic study; however, nearly all are grounded in structuralist thought, where the

relationship between language-use and the social world is conceptualized as a “fixed” and logical set of conditions. As structuralists, Chomsky, Halliday, and Hymes are widely recognized with developing influential linguistic theories that generally (with important differences) assume language comprises multiple functions and dimensions of meaning that coexist and interact; therefore, we can systemically analyze the structures (e.g., grammars) and meanings (e.g., semiotics) of what people actually “say” and “do” to understand the “structured” organization of language and its functions (Mills, 2004; Schiffrin, 1994).

Discourse analysis stemming from linguistics emerged in education during the 1970s to underscore the social context of language development and learning in the classroom that was largely ignored by psychology literature (Heath, 1984). For MacLure (2003, p. 184) classroom studies of learners and teachers raised serious questions about the relationship between discourse and learning in the 1980s: “Educationalists noted that traditional teacher-led talk tended to position students as passive recipients of knowledge, and began to argue for collaborative, informal, non-hierarchical discursive arrangements, such as small-group talk, which would grant students greater autonomy...” Although applied linguistics has influenced important educational research in the areas of cognitive development, language acquisition, and literacy, Pennycook (1994) suggests that this work often neglects to illustrate how discourses constituted in local contexts have political and sociohistorical implications. The attachment of this form of linguistics to a positivist tradition, he argues, legitimizes rigid, technically driven scientific procedures, thereby emphasizing technical description and ignoring critical analyses of the conditions that give rise to our experiences and concerns. Gee (1999) states, however, that a burgeoning body of literature in applied linguistics provides valuable insight into the “micro” politics of discourse by elucidating the ways in which language-use discursively produces meaning (norms, beliefs, and values) and constitutes identities (social and cultural) in everyday settings. This newer form of discourse analysis draws upon a range of social theory from social psychology, anthropology, and sociology to respond to the ways in which language, discourse, and ideology are linked together and to the larger formations of culture, identity, and learning (Lee & Poynton, 2000; MacLure, 2003).

#### *Poststructuralist Discourse Theory*

The writings of Foucault and Derrida, albeit with differing degrees of theoretical specification, are very influential and comprise another tradition of discourse analysis that is labeled under the umbrella term poststructuralist discourse theory. Poststructuralist discourse analysis is quite different from those grounded in structuralist linguistics. Instead of disclosing the secure meanings of language-use existing in a fixed period of time, a poststructuralist conceptualization of discourse analysis consists of evaluating the role of power in shaping social “reality,” and the process of constituting subject positions within an unstable and fluid set of relations (Mills, 2004). In other words, as depicted by MacLure (2003, p. 175), “[d]iscourses within poststructuralism involve much more than language...they can be thought of, rather, as a set of practices for producing meaning, forming subjects and regulating conduct within particular societies and institutions, at particular historical times.”

English (2006, p. 87) states that “although there are many uses of poststructuralist theory, it is Foucault’s writings that are prevalent in adult education.” For Foucault’s contribution to poststructuralist discourse theory concentrates on the “macro” level and helps us see how power relations are involved in constituting discursive practices through the analysis of the formations of such practices. More particularly, a Foucauldian analysis of discourse is concerned with the historical investigation of power and the formation of subject positions (e.g., the insane), objects of discourse (e.g., madness), and the concepts and strategies that constrain certain possibilities through that discourse (e.g., psychopathology). Discourse in this view is linked to social institutions, such as education, and to the “disciplines” (e.g., pedagogy) that regulate and

legitimate the “conduct” of people associated with those institutions (MacLure, 2003, p. 176). Drawing upon Foucault, therefore, educators can examine the discursive rules through which “statements” are put together and regulated that construct a particular social order through a particular discourse.

Wilson and Cervero (1997), for example, employ Foucault’s (1972) “archeology” methodology to reveal the discursive formation and consequences of the dominant tradition of technical rationality on knowledge production within adult education planning theory. Here the authors demonstrate how technical rational meanings are discursively assembled and circulated in adult education planning theory by examining the historical development of American adult education. In a similar yet distinctly different vein, Nicoll and Harrison (2003, p. 24) borrow from Foucault’s (1977, 1980) notion of discourse as power/knowledge to examine the discursive construction and effects of “technical” thinking on professional identity in higher education in the United Kingdom. Analyses such as these help adult educators reveal—in order to question and challenge—the colonization of dominant discourses, such as a technical rational one, on adult educational practice because dominant traditions (as hierarchal relations of power) can severely limit what counts as legitimate educational action and knowledge through the production of restricted meanings of practice and identities.

#### *Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)*

Barker and Galasiński (2001) argue that changes in discourse analysis in recent years has produced analyses that are either strongly influenced by the techniques of linguistics or conceptual insights of social theory. Critical discourse analysis (CDA) attempts to move us away from defining the work of discourse analysis with this linguistic/social theory binary. In an effort to combine linguistic and (post)structuralist traditions, CDA has emerged to “emphasize the social and institutional dimensions of discourse, and attempt to relate these to the textual fabric of everyday life” (MacLure, 2003, p. 186). While informed by a variety of conceptual positions and methods, CDA can be traced to the theoretical developments coming out of the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies, particularly through Gramsci’s notion of hegemony and Foucault’s interpretation of discourse (Barker & Galasiński, 2001). Borrowing from Luke (2002 p. 100), CDA thus seeks to reveal structures of power in our everyday settings: “CDA sets out to capture the dynamic relationships between discourse and society, between the micropolitics of everyday texts and the macropolitical landscape of ideological forces and power relations, capital exchange, and material historical conditions.” In this view, we should view CDA less as an extension of linguistics and more as a critical analysis of the political context in which texts are constructed and used.

CDA, with its explicitly political agenda, has significantly influenced educational research, most particularly in literacy education (Luke, 1995; Rogers, 2003). While it is risky to think of CDA as a unified project, Fairclough’s (1992) three-dimensional conception of discourse analysis is seen as a major effort to standardize analytic concepts and procedures. According to Rogers, Malancharuvil-Berkes, Mosely, Hui, and Joseph (2005), Fairclough (1992) is most often referred to in the education literature; this literature, however, focuses more on the grammatical features of texts and less on the ideological effects and hegemonic processes of discourse.

The theory of CDA and its methodology is beginning to emerge in adult education (e.g., Ayers, 2005; McGregor, 2003; Niewolny & Wilson, 2007) and show promise for adult educators to investigate the production of power (e.g., identity formation) in local settings because of its unique configuration of textual analysis and social theories. The rampant domination of neoliberal ideological-discursive forces within institutions of higher education is an increasingly common theme that is investigated. Ayers’ (2005) critical discourse analysis, for instance, reveals the manifestation of neoliberal ideology in a selection of community college mission

statements. For Ayers, this ideology is instrumental in constituting rational, economic identities of learners through the (re)production of market-driven policy in postsecondary institutions. By following in the tradition of CDA, he explains that once we confront this discursive formation, and the oppressive effects of the global economy on the educational needs of adult learners, we can perhaps better advocate for resistance to the logic of neoliberalism in education: “To the degree that alternative discourses are available, hegemony dissipates into choice, and this invites resistance to domination and oppression (p. 547).” CDA thus unabashedly provides adult educators with a political platform to operate from to meet critical goals in research and instruction.

### **Discourse Analysis for Adult Education Theory/Practice**

We argue that adult educators are in a good position to present a sophisticated yet practical account of discourse analysis for critical adult education. Of growing importance, however, is the idea that one must make explicit the ways in which theoretical and methodological possibilities exist in order to help us better identify—in order to challenge—inequitable conditions in our communities and classrooms. That is, while critical adult education scholars are often investigating the “right” sorts of things, they tend to weakly articulate conceptual perspectives *and* methodological procedures that would enable them to more evidentially “say” what they “see.” Engagement with critical forms of discourse analysis, we argue, may provide key insights for critical adult educators to better recognize, report, and act on the ways in which our practices are politicized: Our practices are political, “even if we are not aware of it, because they carry the power that reflects the interests of those who speak” (McGregor, 2003, p. 2). And because our practices promote the interests of some while ignore others, it is imperative that we transcend the traditional boundaries of adult education to seek new and better ways to constitute meaningful and equitable education. Although linguistics, poststructuralism, and CDA vary widely in sophistication and political analysis, these discourse traditions can perhaps help us achieve this critical goal in adult education theory and practice.

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